

North Savery Project

Draft Environmental Impact Statement



Forest Service

Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland
Brush Creek/Hayden Ranger District

July 2017

Disclaimer:

The Forest Service uses the most current and complete data it has available. GIS data and product accuracy may vary. They may be: developed from sources of differing accuracy, accurate only at certain scales, based on modeling or interpretation, incomplete while being created or revised, have represented features not in accurate geographic locations, etc. The Forest Service makes no expressed or implied warranty, including warranty of merchantability and fitness, with respect to the character, function, or capabilities of the data or their appropriateness for any user's purposes. The Forest Service reserves the right to correct, update, modify, or replace this geospatial information based on new inventories, new or revised information, and if necessary in conjunction with other federal, state or local public agencies or the public in general as required by policy or regulation. Previous recipients of the products may not be notified unless required by policy or regulation. For more information, contact the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland Supervisor's Office (2468 Jackson Street, Laramie, WY 82070, 307-745-2300).

In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its Agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity (including gender expression), sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA (not all bases apply to all programs). Remedies and complaint filing deadlines vary by program or incident.

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language, etc.) should contact the responsible Agency or USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.

To file a program discrimination complaint, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, AD-3027, found online at http://www.ascr.usda.gov/complaint_filing_cust.html and at any USDA office or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by: (1) mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; (2) fax: (202) 690-7442; or (3) email: program.intake@usda.gov.

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

Note: We make every effort to create documents that are accessible to individuals of all abilities; however, limitations with our word processing programs may prevent some parts of this document from being readable by computer-assisted reading devices. If you need assistance with this document, please contact the Brush Creek/Hayden Ranger District at 307-326-5258

**North Savery Project
Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Carbon County, Wyoming**

Lead Agency: USDA Forest Service
Brush Creek/Hayden Ranger District
Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder
Basin National Grassland

Responsible Official: Melanie Fullman, District Ranger
2171 S. Hwy 130, Saratoga, WY 82331

For Information Contact: Josh Peck or Paula Guenther
Brush Creek/Hayden Ranger District
2171 S. Hwy 130, Saratoga, WY 82331
307-326-5258

The Brush Creek/Hayden Ranger District, Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests, proposes to authorize 6,670 acres of vegetation treatments including salvage logging, precommercial thinning, and hazard tree clearing on National Forest System lands in the North Savery Project Area. The district also proposes specific changes to the transportation system in the project area, including changing road maintenance levels, converting road segments to more suitable uses, adding routes to the road system, and decommissioning 21 miles of system roads that are impacting watershed resources. The project decision would identify and designate the minimum road system in the project area in accord with Subparts A and B of the Travel Management Rule. Two alternatives were considered: no-action and a modification of the proposed action that was scoped in 2015. The modified proposed action is the agency preferred alternative.

The environmental analysis for the North Savery Project will proceed according to Section 104 of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act. The decision will be subject to the U.S. Forest Service project-level pre-decisional administrative review process (36 CFR 218, Subparts A and C).

It is important that reviewers provide their comments at such times and in such a way that they are useful to the Agency's preparation of the final environmental impact statement. Comments should be provided prior to the close of the comment period and should clearly articulate the reviewer's concerns and contentions. Submission of timely and specific comments can affect a reviewer's ability to participate in subsequent administrative or judicial review. Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be part of the public record for this proposed action. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, anonymous comments will not provide the respondent with standing to participate in subsequent administrative or judicial reviews.

Send comments to: Paula Guenther, Central Zone NEPA Coordinator
Brush Creek/Hayden Ranger District
PO Box 249, Saratoga WY 82331

Comments Must Be Received by September 12, 2017

Summary

The overall objective of the North Savery Project is to manage forest stands and the associated transportation system to restore future landscape resiliency by accelerating restoration of stands damaged by insects and disease, maintaining emergency access to and egress from National Forest System lands and inholdings, and restoring watersheds to a condition that would be more resilient to runoff and sedimentation during extreme conditions and events.

What is Being Proposed and Why

The Brush Creek/Hayden Ranger District, Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests, proposes to authorize 6,670 acres of vegetation treatments including salvage logging, precommercial thinning, and hazard tree clearing on National Forest System lands in the North Savery project area. The district also proposes specific changes to the transportation system in the project area, including changing road maintenance levels, converting road segments to more suitable uses, adding routes to the road system, and decommissioning 21 miles of system roads that are impacting watershed resources. The vegetation treatments and changes to the transportation system are integral to restoring resiliency to the landscapes and watersheds of the project area so that they contribute to sustainable forest product and water supply in the future. The project decision would also identify and designate the minimum road system in the project area in accord with Subparts A and B of the 2005 Travel Management Rule.

This action is needed because:

- Over the past decade, a mountain pine beetle epidemic has killed pine trees across thousands of acres of forest land in southern Wyoming. In lodgepole pine forests, approximately 70 percent of the trees greater than 6 inches in diameter are dead or dying from mountain pine beetle infestation. Management now will encourage growth of young, resilient trees in this area.
- Timber stands in the North Savery project area are among the most productive growing sites on the Medicine Bow National Forest, and it is a priority to reforest and return these stands to active timber production.
- There is a limited time in which to salvage these trees and recover a sawtimber product.
- Fuel breaks suitable for holding firelines and protecting values at risk do not exist in many parts of the analysis area.
- Standing dead trees create safety hazards to the public and Forest Service employees.
- A National Environmental Policy Act analysis and decision have not yet been made to designate the minimum road system for the North Savery Project area to complete Subparts A and B of the 2005 Travel Management Rule.
- Some designated roads are contributing to degraded resource conditions on the Medicine Bow National Forest, including loss of vegetation, erosion, sedimentation to streams, reduced quality of wildlife habitat, and low resilience to extreme weather events. Road improvements, such as replacing failing culverts, are also needed to maintain the transportation system.
- The Chief of the Forest Service and the Governor of Wyoming have identified this project location as a priority area for treatment due to insect and disease infestation.

Current Conditions in the Project Area

The North Savery project area is located at the northern terminus of the Sierra Madre mountain range on the Brush Creek/Hayden Ranger District, Medicine Bow National Forest. The project area is about 15 miles northwest of the town of Encampment in Carbon County, Wyoming.

Contiguous forests and prevailing winds brought epidemic populations of mountain pine beetles and noticeable mortality to the project area beginning in 2004. Mountain pine beetle populations peaked in approximately 2009. Stand mortality reached a plateau about five years later as beetles depleted their food supply and returned to more typical levels. As a result of bark beetle mortality, dead trees now dominate the view in many areas of the foreground and are visible in the middle and background. Wind, snow, and ice continue to weaken and blow down dead trees, creating a landscape of jack-strawed lodgepole pine interspersed with regenerating forest.

Nearly all mature lodgepole stands include substantial amounts of standing dead timber, some as much as 90 percent dead. Spruce and fir stands are also being affected by insects and disease at smaller scales. Mature aspen stands are being affected by a combination of age, weather, and mortality agents which are causing quick and nearly complete deterioration of these stands.

Most stands in the project area rate above average or superior for the volume of wood produced. However, available volume is decreasing because of the impacts of the mountain pine beetle epidemic, weather, previous management, and other forest threats. Virtually all suitable timber production sites are important for their near- and long-term contributions to the production of wood products to meet commitments to the timber industry made in the Forest Plan.

Current stand conditions are likely to result in fire behavior with increased rates of spread, fireline intensity, and risk to responders. These conditions are not conducive to using fire in its natural role while protecting firefighters and important values at risk. Almost half (48 percent) of the North Savery project area is inside a community at risk identified by Carbon County's Community Wildfire Protection Plan.¹ When areas within 1.5 miles of the communities at risk are considered, the area in or near communities at risk increases to 82 percent.

The North Savery Project includes proposed actions to implement Subparts A and B of the 2005 Travel Management Rule. Of particular concern are roads and unauthorized routes causing erosion and sedimentation in three 6th-level watersheds. Degradation of water resources has been documented in site-specific locations, primarily as the result of road condition or motorized use. In addition, motorized travel is illegal on the 54 miles of unauthorized routes in the project area.

Background, Public Involvement, and Issues Raised

In August 2007, Brush Creek/Hayden District completed the Savery landscape-scale assessment to identify potential land management projects. Proposed actions were developed starting in 2008 and scoped with the public in 2010. The Savery project was delayed between 2011 and 2013 while Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests' personnel responded to the immediate hazards from the Rocky Mountain Region bark beetle incident. Timber and fuels program work resumed with an analysis and decision to implement the Bud Project in 2013, which authorized actions in a portion of the original Savery area, and the Divide Peak Project, which authorized prescribed burning in the area. The Bud project is now being implemented and is providing valuable lessons about timber salvage in beetle-killed stands.

¹ Available at <https://sites.google.com/a/wyo.gov/forestry/fire-management/fire-grants-assistance/fuels-mitigation>

In 2014, the Governor of Wyoming requested the North Savery area as a priority landscape for treatment due to impacts from insects and disease under the 2014 Farm Bill and the amended Healthy Forests Restoration Act. The Chief of the Forest Service designated it as a priority landscape on May 20, 2014. The interdisciplinary team used the northern portion of the original 2010 Savery proposal as a starting point for the North Savery Project. The 2015 proposed action released for public comment during scoping included very few changes from the 2010 proposal.

A notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement for the North Savery Project was published in the Federal Register on December 1, 2015. The notice of intent asked for public comment on the proposal from December 1, 2015 to February 1, 2016. In addition, as part of the public involvement process, the agency published a detailed scoping document which was made available on the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests' website in November 2015.

(http://www.fs.fed.us/nepa/nepa_project_exp.php?project=47913).

The Brush Creek/Hayden Ranger District held two public meetings: one on December 9, 2015 at the Bureau of Land Management Rawlins Field Office in Rawlins, Wyoming and one on December 10, 2015 at the Platte Valley Community Center in Saratoga, Wyoming. A total of 30 individuals attended those meetings. In addition to public meetings, Forest Service personnel have engaged directly with affected individuals, other agencies, and local governments around this project and management of resources in the project area.

The interdisciplinary team considered three key issues from their analysis and public comments during scoping:

- Issue 1) Effects of proposed timber salvage treatments on wildlife, wildlife habitat, and watershed function may be significant and not consistent with the Forest Plan;
- Issue 2) Effects of road closures and road decommissioning may have significant impacts on recreational access to the national forest; and
- Issue 3) Effects of proposed vegetation treatments adjacent to the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail may not align with Congressional direction for management of National Scenic Trails.

After reviewing the public comments, the interdisciplinary team modified the proposed action to include hazard tree clearing on Level 1 roads, more specific design criteria to protect the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail, additional watershed-specific design criteria to mitigate cumulative effects, and minor changes to transportation system proposals.

Alternatives Analyzed

The Healthy Forests Restoration Act limits the range of alternatives to a maximum of three: no action, the proposed action, and, at most, one additional alternative, if that alternative is proposed during scoping or the collaborative process and meets the project purpose and need (HR 1904, section 104). For the North Savery Project, two alternatives are considered in detail: the no-action alternative and the modified proposed action. Issues and concerns raised during scoping have been addressed by iterative development of the 2017 modified proposed action.

Vegetation treatments and transportation system/travel management proposed actions were influenced by public comment, agency collaboration, and environmental analysis. Travel management activities in the modified proposed action were developed from the 2015 Travel Analysis Report for the district (2005 Travel Rule Subpart A). The modified proposed action is the agency preferred alternative.

Modified Proposed Action

The modified proposed action includes silvicultural treatments for timber and fuels management as well as road relocation, reconstruction, and restoration (see table 1 and table 2 below). Most of the proposed activities would take place in Management Area 5.13 which emphasizes forest products and Management Area 5.12 which has a rangeland vegetation emphasis. No activities are proposed on State and private land in the project area or in Management Area 5.15 Forest Products, Ecological Maintenance and Restoration.

This alternative modified the proposed action scoped in 2015 by adding mechanical hazard tree clearing along level 1 roads that would be used to implement the vegetation management actions in the 2016 modified proposed action. Hazard trees would be cleared along roads that are not open for public travel and were not analyzed in the 2008 hazard tree environmental assessment and decision notice for the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests. Watershed analysis refined design criteria for stream health protection by quantifying the extent to which harvest should be deferred in specific watersheds. Additional design criteria to guide management in the immediate Continental Divide National Scenic Trail corridor were developed in coordination with the Rocky Mountain Regional Office and national Continental Divide Trail Coordinator.

Table 1. Timber harvest activities under the modified proposed action.

Activity	Amount in Acres or Miles
Salvage harvest	5,634 acres
Precommercial thinning	1,035 acres
Temporary road construction and reclamation	24 miles
Clearing hazard trees	6.8 miles along fences 0.5 miles along water conveyance ditches 7.5 miles along maintenance level 1 roads
Extra slash treatment to create fuel breaks	220 acres

Table 2. Transportation system changes under the modified proposed action*

Activity	Amount in Miles
Relocate existing system roads to reduce resource damage	0.75
Add specific unauthorized routes to the designated road and trail system	5.5
Changing road or route segments to off-highway vehicle trails	2.6
Decommissioning roads adversely affecting watershed condition and wildlife habitats	20.1

*The location and uses of 137 miles of national forest system roads would not change.

No-action Alternative

The no-action alternative represents the existing condition and trend for resources in the project area. No additional timber harvest, salvage, silvicultural treatments, or changes to the existing designated road and motorized trail systems would be authorized or implemented to accomplish project goals. Additional National Environmental Policy Act analyses and decisions would be required in the future to implement any vegetation management or to designate the minimum road system as required by the 2005 Travel Management Rule (36 CFR 212 Subpart A).

Major Conclusions

Management actions proposed for this project would have both beneficial and adverse effects on natural resources in the North Savery area. Vegetation treatments are intended to create desired conditions and would have beneficial effects on timber stands. Proposed actions for the transportation system are intended to retain forest access for recreation and land management and to mitigate adverse conditions in watersheds and wildlife habitats. Many adverse effects of these activities can be avoided through careful design (see design criteria starting on page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**) and compliance with existing regulations. Table 3 summarizes the effects to watershed conditions, wildlife habitat, and recreation experiences and visual resources along the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail. A summary of effects to other resources and the complete effects discussion are in Chapter 3 of the draft environmental impact statement.

Table 3. Summary of effects to watershed condition, wildlife habitat, and the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail.

Resource	Effects from the No-action Alternative	Effects from the Modified Proposed Action
Stream stability	Existing resource damage associated with current system roads and user-created routes would continue and possibly get worse. Some stream channels at risk of instability from existing degraded watershed condition.	Long-term stability of streambeds and streambanks expected at all decommissioned road-stream crossings. Some stream channels at greater risk of instability from cumulative effects of North Savery and other actions in watersheds with degraded existing conditions.
Streamflow	Predicted measurable increases in North Fork Savery Creek, McLain Creek, Jack Creek, North Spring Creek flows. May cause increased erosion and stream habitat changes.	Further increases in runoff and peak flows expected in portions of the project area. Effects greater in watersheds with the most proposed harvest: North Fork Savery Creek, Nugget Creek, McLain Creek, Jack Creek, and North Spring Creek.
Erosion and sedimentation	No temporary roads, landings or skid trails, so no new erosion or additional compaction at these sites. Existing resource damage associated with current system roads and user-created routes would continue and possibly get worse. Some impacts from unauthorized routes would be reduced as these were decommissioned.	Increased erosion and sediment in streams from 7 miles of temporary road within stream connected disturbed areas, and from harvest units, landings, and skid trails. Reduced runoff, erosion, and sedimentation from road decommissioning or relocation of system roads. Adding 6 miles of user-created routes would perpetuate the existing soil erosion and sedimentation at these sites unless maintenance was improved.
Canada lynx prey species	Habitat for, and abundance of, snowshoe hare and red squirrel (prey species) would decline for a period of time until hiding cover regenerates.	Proposed timber management would retain recruitment trees, snags, and coarse woody debris to contribute toward prey habitat in the future.
Pygmy shrew, American marten, northern goshawk, greater sage-grouse, boreal owl, olive-sided flycatcher, Brewer's sparrow, hoary bat, Hudsonian emerald, and western bumble bee	Decommissioning unauthorized routes would restore minor amounts of habitat. Coarse woody debris from beetle-killed trees would provide habitat for pygmy shrew and American marten.	Decommissioning existing system roads would restore additional minor amounts of habitat. Habitat removed by timber harvest would be lost to beetle kill if no harvest occurred. Some disturbance to pygmy shrews, greater sage-grouse, and Hudsonian emeralds from harvest activities.

Resource	Effects from the No-action Alternative	Effects from the Modified Proposed Action
Brown creeper, snowshoe hare, American three-toed woodpecker, golden-crowned kinglet, Lincoln’s warbler, Wilson’s warbler	Decommissioning unauthorized routes would restore minor amounts of habitat. This would likely improve territory quality for a few individuals. Beetle-killed stands would become unsuitable habitat for brown creeper and golden-crowned kinglet. Over time, snags from beetle-killed trees would provide communal winter roost sites for golden-crowned kinglets.	Decommissioning existing system roads would restore additional minor amounts of habitat. Brown creeper and snowshoe hare habitat removed by timber harvest would be lost to beetle kill if no harvest occurred. Forest Plan standards for recruitment trees, snags, and coarse woody debris would retain some future habitat for prey insects in harvested areas. Some displacement of snowshoe hares from harvest areas during activities.
Continental Divide National Scenic Trail	Falling trees and downed trees would make navigating the trail difficult and more hazardous than usual. Existing scenic integrity objectives for the 14 miles of trail in the project area are high to very high. Scenic integrity objectives do not evaluate natural changes to landscape.	Tree removal along the trail would improve navigation and safety. Managed areas along the trail would be unlikely to meet scenic integrity objectives of high to very high for 3 to 5 years after harvest. Scenic integrity would improve over time as understory vegetation obscured the evidence of timber salvage.

Decision to be Made

Based upon the effects of and public comments on the alternatives, the responsible official will decide whether to:

- Implement any or all of the silvicultural and hazardous fuels reduction treatments proposed;
- Salvage timber from harvest units up to the maximum acres determined by design criteria;
- Allow construction of temporary roads to access vegetation treatments;
- Add unauthorized routes to the transportation system to maintain motorized public access in some portions of the project area, including bringing routes to engineered road standards;
- Remove certain roads from the system network to reduce road density and associated resource impacts so that cumulative effects from vegetation management are minimized; and
- Authorize physical restoration of certain roads and trails.
- Convert certain roads to motorized trails and construct new motorized trail segments to connect them.

Whether to obliterate and restore unauthorized routes is not a decision to be made, but the analysis includes effects disclosure for the methods believed best to physically restore the natural condition of those route locations.